

Mr. Fitch

BY JAMES OPPENHEIM

ELSA thought she had known what love was when, at sixteen, she allowed a boy at high school to carry her books for her. She had not known, however. Now at night she would crumple up at the bedside, her head among the covers, and ask herself why she had to suffer so, such ecstasy and despair were hers during these midwinter days.

For she had come from western Maryland five years before, when she was eighteen; come alone to Pittsburg, armed only with a small inheritance from her mother, to go through the university and then the medical college, drawn by the promise of a great career. All had gone well until the money was largely spent; then she had studied stenography in the summer, and early in the fall secured some secretarial night-work with a Mr. Fitch, a social worker in the Children's Society. But she had not worked for this powerful young man more than a few nights when she found herself obsessed by his personality; day by day she felt the growing danger of love for him; and finally, on a stormy evening, the matter had reached a crisis: he had plainly intimated that he wanted a wife who was "feminine" and "old-fashioned," and he had plainly intimated that he wished she were that woman.

Three months had passed since then. But each day she relived the event: the narrow office on the seventh floor of the Keystone Building, the rain on the window, the powerful young man dominating her from his revolving-chair as she sat at the desk and took his dictation, the feeling that her career was in the balance, that the many desperate years of training for her work in medicine might be thrown away; for Mr. Fitch was outspoken in his contempt of women doctors, and equally outspoken in his determination to get married. She had saved herself narrowly: she had told him that she had her own life to live, and she had resigned her position. She thought herself free.

But now she knew, or thought she knew, what love was. It was a fever and a forgetfulness; it was a beast, sometimes an angel, that lived in her against her will; it was the compression of her whole nature into, as it were, one knife of passion; it was hunger and thirst and restless desire. It was as if she had had a blow over the head so that she had lost one part of her spirit, but only to find a greater part. The intensity with which she lived was a terror and a sharp joy.

And so her work at the medical college languished; her ambition dwindled; and as her money was all gone, her future was but a broken thing in her hands. For five years she had toiled steadily and alone; and now, without warning, she had reached the apparent end.

She was sure of this on a December afternoon as she sat at her typewriting-machine in the hall bedroom at Mrs. Mayhew's. Previously she and her young friend, Enid Wardell, had shared the large front room down-stairs, but Enid had since married, and so Elsa had been forced to move. Yes, she thought this afternoon, and might be forced to move farther. Her poverty was unbelievable.

The large room had been warmed by a radiator; the small room had only a little gas-stove set on the floor beside the unsteady table that held the typewriter; and, although the stove flamed and its sooty smell filled the air, Elsa had to wear a woolen sweater to keep warm. Her fingers were stiff, and it was difficult for her to tap the keys.

Though it was only three in the afternoon, the gray smokes of Pittsburg suggested twilight; she was thinking of lighting the gas above her head, for the manuscript she was copying was becoming illegible. This manuscript represented an attempt to make money, the following of a suggestion made by a medical student that, as she had failed to find work—and it was only part-time

work that she could do—she should try earning her living by writing. Why not write some popular medical articles—how to avoid tuberculosis, for instance.

This she had done; and also one on "Massage." The first had already been rejected by a magazine, but it was returned with a note from the editor, recommending "greater condensation," yet expressing his regret that his magazine had already printed too much upon the subject. The second had not yet been heard from; and, with her hopes involved in its adventure, Elsa was attempting to condense the first. But all the joy had gone out of the work.

She kept tapping the keys listlessly. Then she rubbed her fingers together to warm them, and reached for the match-box. At that moment there was a knock upon the door. She turned, with terrible eagerness.

"Come in," she called. The door opened, and Mrs. Mayhew entered.

"A letter, Miss Brack," she panted.

Then Elsa saw the large envelope, and flushed painfully. "Thanks," she murmured, rising and taking it. "It's nothing."

Mrs. Mayhew looked keenly at the trembling girl, at the troubled blue eyes, the shaking hands. "It's come back, eh?" she asked.

Elsa tried to fool Mrs. Mayhew, and possibly herself as well. "Yes, but it's all in the day's work."

"It's too bad," said the landlady, sympathetically. "And I hate, too, to think about the back rent."

"Oh, I know!" cried Elsa; and she could not quite keep the

anguish from her voice. "I'll surely do something soon."

"I know you will," said Mrs. Mayhew. "Sure you will. Of course it isn't easy to run a house like this: the rent's high."

Elsa could say nothing; she looked down at the floor, and Mrs. Mayhew withdrew.

Then Elsa opened the envelope, and drew out with the manuscript a printed rejection-slip. Not even a personal letter! She sat down, her head sank over the typewriting-machine, and she wept.

She had not known that she could be so lonely; that she could hunger so for human sympathy, for the warm intimacy of understanding, for the healing of an-



THERE WAS A KNOCK UPON THE DOOR

other's touch. She had known loneliness before, much of it; but not the loneliness of bereavement, not the loneliness of desire. She glanced over at the bed, at the foot of which were stacked several of those stupid technical medical books, and all her passion for a great science seemed to die.

"I want to be a woman," she told herself—"a plain, common, every-day woman!"

She longed in that moment to rest back on the common sense of the race; to give herself to the seasonal rhythms of the common life; to the strong, fixed, comforting routine of eating, drinking, sleeping, loving, begetting; yes, to those things which are the solid fruits of the millions of years of evolution. And all that was feminine in her desired to be mastered—to be mastered by a man; the strong arm, the creative will, shielding and steering and absorbing her. If Mr. Fitch had opened the door then—she glanced up through tear-wet eyes in her primitive and divine weakness!—he could have commanded, and she would have followed.

It was laughable, really; the sublime adventure of her adolescence, the four desperate years at the university, the one year at the medical college, the unfailing faith that sustained her, the miracles of anatomy, the glowing future coming nearer and nearer, and then the fine career ahead—all of these things trampled, beaten back, and routed at the first onset of human passion, at the first stir and cry of the woman within her! Laughable and ridiculous!

"Tut!" she exclaimed, rising, trying to shake off this terrible mood. "It's because I haven't any one to talk to—and it's because I haven't any money!"

She went to the window. The street was darkening; the lamp-lighter was crossing the gutter; and Elsa, watching the light leap up in the gloom, felt that it was impossible to stay alone in this cold little room any longer. She must go where there was comfort, warmth, light, human faces. She knew: she would go down-town and see Enid—Enid in her tiny house. Enid at least would put her arms about her and kiss her.

She turned back into the shadows, put her little coat over the sweater, pinned

on her hat, and then fled from the house. The bracing air sent her swiftly through the streets: a woman making the great search, the universal search, the search for understanding and love.

Alighting from the car, she turned down a narrow side-street, the little red-brick houses of which stood one below the other on a downward slope. Elsa stopped before one of the little houses, the shade of whose front room was a warm yellow with the gas-light behind it. She went up two steps, rang the bell, and the door opened.

"Why, Elsa!" cried Enid. And at once arms were about her and she was kissed. The tears trickled down her cheeks.

Enid drew her into the hall, babbling as usual. "Why, goodness! Come right into the sitting-room and take off your things. You know, I was going to see you to-morrow. Elsa, what is the matter?"

Elsa laughed softly. "Can't I cry if I want to?"

The soft, yellow-haired, pretty girl stared at her sharply. "You silly thing!" she cried, indignantly. "I know what's the matter. You're killing yourself over that horrid medical work. Now you sit down; I'm going to talk to you."

Elsa had always felt very mature next to Enid; but now Enid was a married woman, and Elsa was merely a woman. She was shocked, and came sharply to herself. "Well!" she exclaimed. "But be merciful, En!"

They sat down together on a little couch, and Elsa felt the comfort of the room. It had little furniture in it, and that was all new and rather frail, but it was small and bright; and the soft form and yellow hair and glistening blue eyes beside her suffused it all with animation.

"Haven't you a job yet?" asked Enid.

"No." Elsa was really beginning to feel that Enid was married, and that their ancient positions were reversed. She was now the child.

"Three months!" cried Enid. "Well, dear, you shouldn't have left Mr. Fitch."

The words were like lightning cleaving her, unexpected, overwhelming. She sat trembling, unable to speak, knowing that if she talked at all the talk would come in a revealing flood. She even

feared that the expression of her face was betraying her.

Enid lowered her voice and went on: "Elsa, I met him only the other day." She paused, and Elsa thought she felt Enid's eyes upon her. "He asked after you — wanted to know where you were and what you were doing. You see, he knows John; and he's going to come here to see us soon. You shouldn't have left him."

Elsa's head seemed heavy with sudden dizziness. "Ah," she thought. "I mustn't come here any more."

"You see," Enid continued, in the infinite wisdom of two months of married life, "I know men now, and Mr. Fitch—but that's John!"

A key had mercifully clicked in the lock of the front door, and Enid leaped up and flew out, and there was a joyous meeting in the hall. Elsa arose unsteadily.

"Elsa is going to stay to supper," said Enid.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Elsa, swiftly. "I just ran in a moment; I've promised to get back."

They wanted her to stay, but she made her escape to the street.

It was too late to return to Mrs. Mayhew's, and she felt that she could not do without supper, for she had gone without lunch. Economy these days! Supper would come to twenty-five cents: fifteen cents for meat, five for coffee, and

five for the waiter. She had less than five dollars now in all the world; but she was beginning to feel faint and light-headed with hunger. And more than food, possibly, she needed the warmth and stimulation of resting in a lighted room with people all about her.

So she found a little place in a basement that, with tiling, mirrors, and electric lights, was warm and neat and sparkling; and, dismally sitting there in a corner alone, she ate of courage and hope; and all the while she thought: "He asked after me! No, I mustn't go to Enid's any more!"

She could almost feel his powerful personality coming nearer and nearer, as if he were searching for her through the streets of the city, as if she might meet him if she left the restaurant. And the thrill of comfort, the awakening of ecstasy, that came from this surmise warmed her more than the hot coffee. Why fight longer? She owed Mrs. Mayhew twelve dol-

lars; she had no work; her manuscripts were rejected, her studies becoming mechanical; her whole life had led into this blind alley; and there was no escape. None, save through him! Ah, that was the thrilling element in life!

She paid her quarter, and then climbed the steps into the city's white night avenue. And she became a part of the



AT ONCE ARMS WERE ABOUT HER

processions and the lights. Electric advertisements were like living, writhing monsters on the house-tops and jutting over the pavement; the parallel lines of shop-windows gushed a radiance; the cars passed up and down; crowds flowed into the theaters. This was the comfortable House of Night, each side-street that she passed like a window looking out on immeasurable blackness. And she felt like a bleak beggar in this House.

She paused, out of sheer misery, before a jeweler's shop, the brilliant show-window full of flashing paste-gems. And then she saw a sign fluttering at the doorway: "Saleslady wanted; night-work only; for the holidays." Hope gripped her heart, and she stepped into the shop.

It was empty of all save the proprietor, who leaned heavily against one of the glass cases: an ape-faced man, with sharp, black eyes, displaying hands that were bediamonded.

"I saw the sign," Elsa said, flutteringly, "for the saleslady."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Experienced?"

"No."

"What do you do in the daytime?"

She almost blushed; his sharp glance, his prosperous greasiness, overmastering her.

"Why—I'm—I'm a medical student."

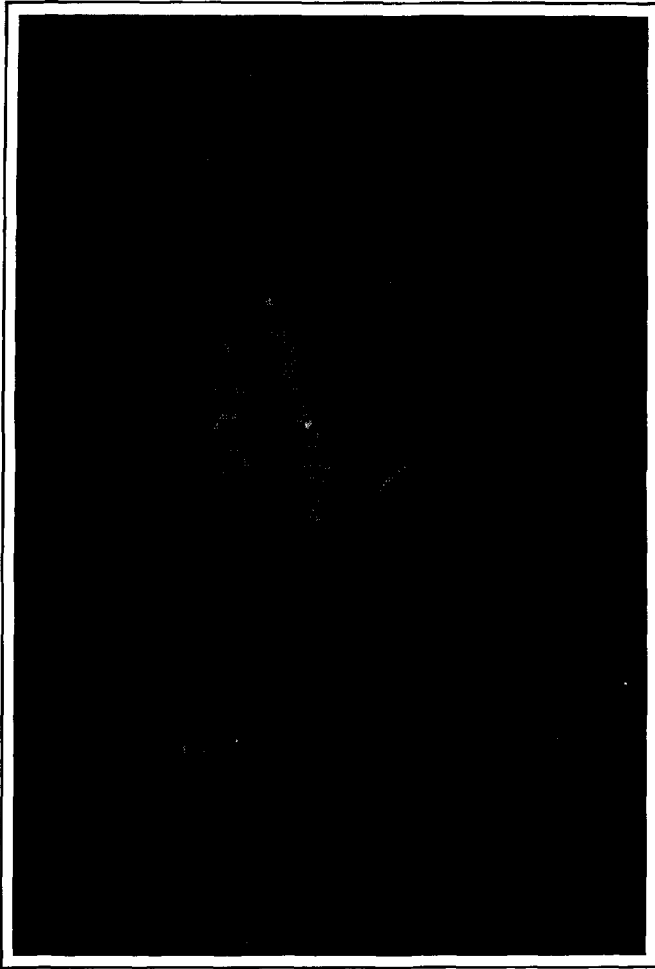
"Studying to be a doctor, huh?"

"Yes."

He gave a short laugh of disgust.

"Well," he said, "I haven't any use for that kind of a girl. Now you know it!"

Yes, she knew it! She bolted from the store, her blood singing through her. He had given her a blow in the face that brought her to her senses. She had something to fight for indeed! She was helping to emancipate women; she was struggling to give woman her place in the world against poverty, against ridicule, against even—love! Every fight she had fought from the time she was a girl reinforced her now. How weak she had been, how faint! No, in spite of the black moment, she was going to fight through; and as for Mr. Fitch, she had pushed him out of her life, and now he should not find her.



"WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO THIS FOR?"



"NOT A GOOD HOUSEWIFE, EH?"

"I'll take a cheaper room," she told herself, "and I'll do any kind of work. I'll even stop college for a while if I must! Ah, Elsa Brack!" she gave a little, excited laugh, "you and I have things to do in the world!"

She took the car home, convinced that she had pulled victory from defeat.

She had yet to learn better, however. For although Mrs. Mayhew agreed to wait a while longer for her money, and although she took a cheap room on Pittsburg's "Hill," she soon found her condition impossible. And as soon as she was assured of this a listlessness came upon her. She had extended the habit of going without lunch to going without breakfast; and as this made her at times subject to spells of dizziness, and as the bitter outdoor cold seemed to soak

through to her bones, she stayed home from college several days. The room was in the gabled garret; its walls slanted sharply; and it contained merely a couch, a wash-stand, a chair, and a bit of rag-carpet. It was lit by a lamp, and the first few nights, in order to get light on her open book, she had to place it on the floor and lie down before it. The room was nakedly cold, getting a draught from every direction; and as she found the bed warmer than the floor, she remained in it as much as possible.

It was about four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. She was in bed, in all her clothes, reading feverishly, her head raised with the aid of her elbow; and the wind was sweeping the garret and rattling the loose door. Mrs. Gaines called hoarsely from the floor below:

"Oh, Miss Brack! Oh, Miss Brack! You up there?"

She was startled, and leaped, shivering, out of bed. Her feet and hands were numb, her head light. She set the door ajar.

"Yes, Mrs. Gaines."

"Summun to see you. Waiting at the door."

She felt like sinking where she stood. Was it Mrs. Mayhew after the money? Or Enid, put on the trail by Mrs. Mayhew? Or— No, no; impossible! Why should he search the whole city through for her? But she turned back with feminine haste to glance in the cracked mirror, to adjust the sweater, to pat the hair into place. Then down the stairs dizzily she hurried.

Even in the gloom of the hall she saw the tall, masculine frame, the large head. She stopped five steps from the bottom, holding tight to the banister. "Yes," she whispered.

"Hello!" He advanced overpoweringly, held out his hand, and instinctively she offered hers, and he gripped it tinglingly, warmly. A strange ecstasy undated her. Then, leaning near, he spoke in that intimate, candid, good-fellow way of his:

"Say, what do you want to do this for, anyway?"

"What?" she gasped.

"Go live in a place like this. No job, eh?"

"No."

"And yet you chucked the job with me. You *are* the queerest!"

In the silence she felt the glorious peril of his personality drawing nearer and nearer, and she did not move. But he began speaking again.

"Now I'll tell you what I want you to do. I want you to come over to my mother's and have supper with us. She cooks great, and I bet you haven't had a home-made meal in an age. You'll come, won't you?"

Of course she would not. That was plain. But she thought of the tasteless, miserable supper alone; and she thought of the vision of Loneliness. Her whole body seemed to laugh softly.

"Yes," she murmured. "I'll come."

"Run up, then," he cried, heartily. "Get on your things. I'll wait here."

A few minutes later she came running down the stairs like a young girl going to her first dance. "I'm ready," she cried, gaily.

"Good! We'll walk it, to warm up!"

They walked swiftly down to the water-side, and then tramped along the foot-path of one of the long iron bridges that span the Monongahela. Smoke went up from mills and locomotives on both banks, and a great shoal of coal-barges floated down the smooth tide beneath them. It was a gray, bitter afternoon, and a thin, stinging snow swept with the cutting wind. They could not talk; but now and then Mr. Fitch took her arm to help her along, and this touch gave her a marvelous feeling of being protected and sheltered.

They left the bridge and entered a region of tangled streets, dirty stores and saloons, and rows of little red-brick houses; and down one of these streets he piloted her. At its end stood a mill, the great smokes blowing gray into the gray of the winter. He stopped before one of the houses, and she was almost sorry, feeling now as if she could tramp miles with him. Her blood tingled as she stood waiting, while he found his key and opened the door. Then she stood in the little, warm hall, and he was calling up the stairway:

"Mother! Company, mother! Company for supper, mother!"

Elsa heard a low voice from above: "All right, . . . coming."

And down came a little, gray woman, worn, wrinkled, and perfectly obedient to her big son. She received a kiss from him, and then looked at Elsa.

"Miss Brack," said Mr. Fitch.

The woman nodded. "All right, William," she said.

Elsa went pale. She had never heard Mr. Fitch's first name before. "William," she thought. "William." At once a wall between herself and him seemed broken through; he seemed simpler somehow, as much of a boy as a man; even the way he talked seemed more quiet and crude than she had remembered.

"Well," she heard him saying, "now let's hustle. We've walked up a terrific appetite, mother. Get everything out, for we're going to eat it."



SHE HAD TO ADMIRE A FAT, WORN-OUT COPY OF THE "SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON"

"I'll help your mother," said Elsa.

"No," retorted Mrs. Fitch, in a curiously decisive way; "that's all right. Just come in the dining-room."

Mr. Fitch—William (how should she think of him?) winked joyously. "Righto, mother!" he cried, and they all went in together.

The dining-room was snug and warm; a stove, partly red-hot, stood at one side, and the cloth was laid with two places. Mr. Fitch insisted on Elsa sitting down in a little rocker by the window, while, playfully, he set another place. He was big and awkward at this, and Elsa watched him, smiling.

"Not a good housewife, eh?" he growled.

She laughingly agreed. And then as she sat there she felt faint again with hunger. She longed to get up and snatch

a piece of the entrancing white bread that stood on the table. In came the mother then from the kitchen beyond, with a large platter of beef stew, steaming delightfully; and then they all sat down. And everything tasted so good that for the time being Elsa thought of nothing else. Now and then Mr. Fitch glanced at her with a curious expression.

"Mother," he said, finally, laying down knife and fork, "I told Miss Brack she'd enjoy a good home-made meal for a change!"

Elsa blushed, and the mother nodded. "That's right!" she said; "that's right! It ain't fun living in a boarding-house."

Elsa looked at Mr. Fitch tremulously, and he laughed cynically.

"Boarding-house, mother," he broke in—"lodging-house. Eats in restaurants. What do you think of that?"

Elsa felt that she should have felt hurt; and yet somehow this evening she could not. Nothing could hurt her feelings after the bitter loneliness, the ghastly privation; just to sit in this warm room, with two human beings, and eat plentifully was a marvelous experience. She was just an animal sitting by the fire, content, vacant-minded, purring with warmth.

As Mrs. Fitch cleared the table her son whispered to Elsa: "She's not used to company, but I want you to be alone with her." And when his mother returned he whispered something to her. She smiled on him delightfully.

"Miss Brack," she said, "I want to show you over the house."

A forgotten woman-chord was touched in Elsa as the awkward, proud old woman took her through. It was as if she were being taken by the mother down back through the life of her son, so that she might live it over and so immerse herself in him. She had to think of the big man as a baby (this was the room he was born in), as a child learning to walk, as a boy playing great games in the garret. She saw the lovely, laughable picture of Lincoln he had drawn when he was twelve; the mother had hung it framed over her bed. She had to admire a fat, worn-out copy of the *Swiss Family Robinson*, all adorned with unsightly wood-cuts. And then she saw the room he now occupied.

Mrs. Fitch lost her embarrassment and talked. "A good boy he's always been, independent and strong. He was always head of the gang, and never afraid of anything. Of course he was bad at times; but that's natural to boys. But after he commenced earning money, never a bit of trouble. Just brought home his pay-envelope every Saturday night (you know he worked in that mill down there at the end of the street—worked his way right up)—brought it home and gave it me. That's what I call a good son. A great worker! Educated himself by night until he could leave the mill and go working over in town—doing good for others."

Elsa smiled, and dreamily she changed places with the mother, became the mother, and dipped herself in the strange, sweet past. She loved him for what he

had been; she wished she had known the tiny boy that began to walk on the rag-carpet. A good son! Something hidden in her vibrated, swelling her happiness with an exquisite sadness.

They came down the stairs, and the "good son" was waiting under the gas-light in the hall.

"Have to go now," he said, smiling at her. She smiled in return. It was all familiar, seasoned, homely, human.

He helped her on with her coat; she said good-by to the mother, and they stepped out into the night. It seemed immeasurably late or early, neither night nor day. For at the end of the street, from above the shed of the mill, a mighty mane of flame rolled into the glowing heavens, as if the building were on fire; the great smokes played through it; flakes of flame leaped and fell in showers; and a lightning kept glancing down the narrow street, illuminating it with a terrific vividness. Not a soul was in sight; the houses appeared shut up, sleeping; and enchanted, feeling strangely savage and wild, Elsa looked at Mr. Fitch and saw him as she had not seen him before. The glare chiseled him as if he were marble; he was an immense modern man in his long coat, his slouch hat, the large, brown eyes gleaming, the big, crooked mouth full of determination, and a great black shadow fell on the lighted pavement behind him.

"Here's where I grew up!" he said, exultantly. "And I worked there—there right with that fire, right up against it, pulling the lever to make the converter dip like a big egg until it poured out the new steel. Think of it on a summer's night!"

She stood spellbound. This was the real world at last; she beheld it for the first time. The real world, where man, little, monstrous-brained creature, working with the elements, broke his way, fighting, and wrought his civilizations. Here was a world being created: fire and metal and labor. Ah yes, life was just as primitive as ever: still the hunt, the battle, the mystery, and—so she realized, thrilling through and through—man and woman; man and woman weaving their love through it all.

"We'd better be going," he said, and

they started over the bridge. Snow was falling, the swirling flakes black against the glare.

Gusts of trouble came to Elsa. She held in her failing hands all the years of her life; it was that creation-moment when she could make her own future; when, by jetting up a little of her old strength, she could keep to the life-work, the great career, she could conserve the struggles, the ambitions, the agony and joy of the past. Was it not shameful, too? To Mr. Fitch she was merely a woman; but in her work she was a power, a force to be reckoned with. Surely a few days' hunger, a slight money debt could not weaken her so! Thus she strove to argue with herself, and all the while, like a sail in the wind, little by little she was torn from the mast, and knew that she must give herself to the glory of the heavens.

He stopped her short, took her arm, and turned to the railing.

"Look!" he

roared above the wind, and pointed. She saw that flame in the night, near his home; and the river beneath was a glazed sheet pricked by white flakes, whereon a barge was floating; and beside that flame loomed black the eight distinct pipes of the blast-furnace.

He had to speak close, very close, to her ear to be heard.

"I want to tell you something—remember when we spoke in our office? I said I wanted a man-size job. Well, I'm with the steel people now. Got a good job, too, starting on twenty-five hundred a year. Enough for two."

She began to tremble weakly. She saw herself as his wife in a neat little house, where every room would begin to fill with such echoes as she had heard in the place of his childhood. Tears blinded her.

"You know why I took the new job?" he went on. "I'd been looking for you ever since you left. Mrs. Lindsey sent me to Mrs. Mayhew, and Mrs. Mayhew sent me to that—that shack. Haven't you had enough of it yet? Aren't you going to settle down and be a woman?"

She said nothing; he took her hand, turned her about a little; and that dark wave of his strength she had felt so often threatening now overwhelmed her. The sail had blown loose, and the great gales were lifting and swirling it. She



"HERE'S WHERE I GREW UP"

was drawn closer and closer; she heard her name repeated over and over again, passionately, hoarsely; she was close to his face. Then she lifted her own, and her spirit left her, and was his. They stood, his great-coat about her, their lips close; and she knew that she was woman of woman, the mate, the mother. This was her doom, and she accepted it.

